Two Segments from *Douesta's Dreams*

The Crawling Man

There is poetry in everything. That is the biggest argument against poetry.
—Miroslav Holub

(In the morning we woke up it was time to leave. She was going to stay with her mother it was Christmas and I went to see my parents and my brother. At the bus I said goodbye. I love you deeply she said. She had never said that and I felt suddenly inflated and awake goodbye I said I'll miss you we went in different directions I couldn't sleep for two weeks I was at home and I couldn't sleep all night I would feel air humming just under my skin between my ribs whistling across my whole body I talked I yelled I laughed it was dark Douesta loves me exclamation point two weeks of invented love always telling her for hours and hours each night she was far away we talked on the phone for three minutes when I called she was reading the last page of the best book she had ever read I miss you I love you I'll see you soon I miss you taking imaginary walks with her different ways of making her happy new things to say if I remember them and say them later it won't be spontaneous the moment will be lost is anguish if I know what I will say or do it's like art like reworking not life and I can't know the outcome how I'll feel but is it an act of bad faith such awareness and knowing what you're doing like that the night before we left I thought of putting my hands both carefully into her tearing in a slow motion her body wide open dripping blood like half-carcasses in a slaughterhouse have you ever seen them cut up the belly why did she keep calling me to her she knew how I felt I had to be alone with her I would forget and I kept coming back too my brother told me if she's sleeping with all those other guys too just think about it every time you kiss her you're sucking some other guy's cock and when we woke up I was quiet I only took my bag and began to walk with her but then I love you deeply she said she said it said it to me and I was awake I vibrated for two weeks air humming centers of whirlpools forming under my fingers in my nipples one morning I slept for two hours woke up I was fresh

and the strange monster of day had descended obliviously I went out of the room a man stood there I was his son) "What's this?" his wife—my mother—asked.

"It's just something I brought home. I thought the kids might like it." "Did you think I might like it?" "I don't care if you like it or not. You and I are too old to start getting culture now. I got it for the kids. I want them to have things we never had."

My father has never stammered. My mother has never stuttered. What the technical difference between stammering and stuttering is I do not know, but doctors have told us that my brother does the one and I do the other. Still, we have never been able to agree on where the line is drawn. This has provided us food for thought and subject matter for dinner-table conversation.

§

I like it best, said the Crawling Man, whose name the painting bears, when the lights are off late at night. Then I can relax a little. This position is so awkward, cramped on all fours between these two obvious lovers. It's no way for a man to spend his allotted time.

§

One has to look very closely to distinguish the forms. Only after the painting had hung in our house for over a year did I realize that it was, indeed, a human being—a man not unlike myself, though older, I imagined. My brother, I believe, still thinks it's a dog, or perhaps a goat. This has always provided a topic for after-dinner conversation.

Sticking in the corner is something very much like an identifying mark. An ego, perhaps—a signature.

Picasso

An art historian once told my father that the painting was definitely from his brush. Picasso, he told us, had stuttered terribly as a child, so that his father had given up all hope of the boy's becoming a great statesman and sent him off to study medicine. That bald-headed bastard, thought the Crawling Man, has me trapped in here and pretends he doesn't even notice.

§

My father used to play with the Crawling Man at night. He would steal into the dark room and suddenly shine his flashlight on him. He caught the Crawling Man off guard the first few times, but then he began to sense my father's presence, began to get into the spirit of the game. My father loved games.

§

The surface of the painting, though boring in its texture, developed one interesting feature. It became wet. Authorities seem pretty well agreed that it was water which was coming from the Crawling Man himself, not from the woman and man on either side of him. These two figures, they concluded, have actually very little to do with the painting. They seem bored by their picturesque existence. They never move. They do not look into each other's eyes. They don't embrace, although in a painting one would expect an embrace to be the most natural thing in the world. Picasso was born too late, the experts recalled, to be counted among the painters of the romantic school.

My brother has a great many things which my father and mother never had. Most of all he has culture. Whenever a question of a cultural nature arises "Let's ask your brother" says my father, and off we go. He is usually in his room scribbling away at his manuscripts.

Picasso had a great quote about progress. I can't remember it now.

§

"I just can't understand this painting you've brought home," said his wife. "You're not supposed to under*stand* it," said the art collector. "It's great art. Just sit back and let it overwhelm you." He lit a cigar, poured himself a cup of coffee and waited for the series of whelms which always came over him about this time in the evening. Strangely, they did not come tonight. He looked at the picture, sipped his coffee, sat facing the canvas, but nothing came .

Loss of inspiration is psychologically shattering. It may be time for a change, thought my father. He got down on his hands and knees, ignoring the questions and comments of his wife. "What are you doing? Boy do you look silly." He emulated the Crawling Man.

§

My father and I took a long walk. I had the feeling it was about to be one of those moments where my father talks and I have to listen and I hate it all. I lived in constant, then recurring dread of these moments when I am called upon to show my loyalty or mend my ways. I, said my father, am not an artist, and neither are you. That is why I feel I can talk to you and not to your brother, who is an artist. Artists themselves often don't appreciate the need for people like us. I have striven to become an appreciator of the arts. I wanted to be a great artist, but the odds were against me from the start. (He was looking up into the trees, not at me. I could tell it was an effort.) So I decided to work and work for an appreciation of art, which was also difficult, as I was not very artistically inclined. I always liked poetry, but I can't understand the stuff your brother writes. Houseman is about as far as I go. (gesture up to the branches) "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now is hung with bloom along the bough . . ." Do you know that? It's a lovely poem. Well anyway so I wanted you to be able to appreciate art in a way I never could. Good appreciators are as necessary as good artists.

This has always been a painful memory. How does one appreciate art? On what basis can one judge art? I tried looking at the painting which my father could no longer contemplate. The inspiration had run out for him, I knew, and he wanted me to carry on.

I would wake up very early in the mornings and go into the room where the Crawling Man was. I looked at it from every angle, trying to see something new in it, something besides a representation of two standing figures and a crawling man. The water had increased from the fine film which had barely covered the canvas and now dripped and clung along the bottom of the frame falling slowly and voluptuously, detaching a langourous moment after I felt it must fall to the floor. It spread slowly and evenly and I had to stand a little farther away from the picture every morning. The frame began to glisten along the edges as the sun came up.

§

My brother announced at dinner that he had written a poem—an epic which had tormented him for months. Since the painting had come into our house he had had no rest; the figures had attracted him with their torturous glances, he told us, and all but commanded him to write. The poem, he explained carefully, slowly so as not to stutter, was not so much about the painting as for the painting, if we knew what he meant.

Our mother asked if we could see the poem. He pulled it from his pocket and read.

§

§

§

§

We ate in silence our spaghetti. My brother read on.

§

§

Later my father was to recall that moment.

§

My brother stammered a bit on the last line. We sat in silence. The painting was dripping profusely. After a while our mother smiled. It's nice, she ventured. Nice?! he snapped. It's art!

§

We sold the painting after that and all tried to forget about it. My father, I think, used to steal into the darkened room at night, cramped on hands and knees, to lap hesitantly at the water.

Fantasy Études

Syphilis is not the object of making love. —Theo van Doesburg

Hands cast up before my face I am sitting in my chair as strong men begin to enter my room. They walked on the street and they were strong and handsome and they begin to beat me with their hands they kick me with their feet their bodies push against mine I can see their smooth skins tight over muscle and smell their sweat dripping like sexual water feel their blows not pain but force driving into me penetrating freeing me they leave the room the door stands ajar my body lies broken on the floor. My brother worked and worked on his book for weeks "and this" showing

me the manuscript "is all I have so far." He calls it the literature of ideas because he is writing not about things, about real things, but about ideas. "It centers around a painting by Picasso where a man crouches painfully on hands and knees between two lovers, separating them. Yet he is not holding them apart. They have placed themselves away from each other. You see, the inability to express feelings is one of my main themes." I look at him without moving and the steam comes up to our faces from the coffee cups.

The Artistic Process: *The Artist's Hands Lift The Red-Dyed Canvas*

(. . . the long stick moving slowly the canvas in the black pot in the red-colored dye and slowly and this is all we see and after the canvas has been dyed a dull scarlet and while it is dripping and hot it is lifted from the pot with a long wooden stick the canvas is long it is not wide and it is lifted from the pot with a long wooden stick and placed dripping and hot on the heavy wooden roll the canvas is long and the artist's hands grasp it is not wide lift the heavy roll and the canvas drips red dye and gives steam the artist's hands lift the red-dyed canvas and the canvas drips and gives thick steam . . .)

My brother worked on his book. He studied the painting by Picasso for weeks before he wrote about it, looked at it in all shades of daylight and in the dark, inside, outside. He sat in the blackness and held an electric flash in his hand. Tch—He saw the painting in the brilliant light for an instant. Tch—"I want a psychological and physiological memory of this painting. I want it in my subconscious, ingrained in my braincells. I can't remember color. Nobody can. I want it to be part of me." He said.

Art: *My Brother's Painting*

The landscape with flowing background . . . sky . . . suddenly there is a strong stroke of green through the canvas and my brother is finished . . . taking off his clothes he is confused by his gradual nakedness . . . does not know what to remove next . . . I must explain this to him over and over.

We all sat down to dinner and my father talked. So how is your book coming? Slowly. I am working with an electric flash. Tch-tch. Studying this painting. I am writing about a painting by Picasso, but not so much about the painting as about my ideas, about ideas. (I try to figure out what the difference is between ideas and real things. I ask my father.)

My Brother: *He Was the Mystery Woman*

And everybody desired him. His black high heels glistened like sparks beneath his tight black dress. Black hat. And a tiny black handbag—the kind seductive dames are forever pulling a shiny snubnosed .38 out of in the movies.

My brother has been working on his book for years, forcing it painfully now, no longer in love with it at all. Now he sits facing us over the salad bowl, my father asking insistently how is it coming how is it coming, and he looks across the salad picking a leaf of green lettuce and biting it . . . crisp . . . "I have been trying to develop a homogeneous work that will hang together, what the Germans call a *Gestalt*—a literature of ideas where not things but merely thought, the primum mobile, is represented. But I got caught up on the theme of alienation, on the imagery of the painting, the symbolism, and the whole plot suffered because of it. I can never get past the landscape . . . the strong stroke of green." I hesitate while he speaks, then bite a slice of tomato.

Disease: *The Land*

After the first time I slept with Douesta I got sick everybody went to the doctor and I could only dream. (Now that I am syphilitic I want to set the record straight. I am in good company.) My brother lay on his bed gazing impartially out the window. The sky, he noticed, wasn't doing anything, but the colors were nice.

My father looked down to the other end of the table. Pass the mashed potatoes he said, and we passed them. What are you going to do about it? I could get it treated, but did Napoleon get it treated? Did Beethoven get treated? Adrian Leverkühn? I am going to compose a panegyric in praise of it. We ate in silence feeling the glow of creation emanating from my brother's head. Trees scraping on the window . . . what are you up to? Writing a book about it, what else?

Sitting impartially at the typewriter it strikes my brother that he is not setting the record straight. Venereal disease, so they say, has reached epidemic proportions throughout the land, and the president and secretary of state sit up long hours in their private meeting room looking out the window.

§

"Look at my country," said the president. "This is my country in which I am well pleased." "Yes," replied the secretary of state, "the land is good. It is a truly great land." Silence. "The people," ventured the president after the silence, "are sick. Sick at heart, sick at soul, sick in their funny little bodies." "They are tired," agreed the secretary of state, "tired of politics, tired of television, tired of syphilis." Silence. "There must be a way to restore confidence," the president let fall the remark. "Yes," conceded the secretary of state, "it is too true. The country is sick and the healing must begin." My brother put a strong green stroke through the canvas and ran out to the corridors of the castle shouting it's finished it's finished. He saw Douesta at the elevators and removed his clothes slowly, confused by his gradual nakedness, letting brushes and palette fall. The secret service were not far away.

It's finished! She only smiled and got into the elevator. Going up without him. Would you like to buy a piece of America? Feel more secure about your land, own a part of it. You can trust it best if it's yours. "I am pleased with the secret service," remarked the president. "They are doing well with this new program of selling the land." "The program," offered the secretary of state, "will restore the faith the people once had in their system." "But," the president sadly pointed out, "it may not halt the deadly march of syphilis nor the dread gonorrhea." They chewed on that for a while.

§

My brother running up the steps to the parapets. The monk looked out his tower window and saw them approach, she in flowing white out of the sunlight, he in white body out of the shadows on the other side. He bit his tongue and turned back to the parchment before him. The flames had already started in the corner of the room, but he was not to notice them until it was too late. Too late for me, too late for anybody. The secret service knocked at our door and my father went to answer it, mashed potatoes in his mouf. Yes? Two men peered out of trench coats. Would you like to buy some land? A piece of America?

§

"Now almost all the land has been sold, and at reasonable prices, affordable by everyone," triumphed the president. Throwing a pall over their momentary return from the ashes, the secretary of state timidly announced, "I have syphilis."

§

You just have to trust it if you own it and tend it and live on it and you go out and look over it in the crisp dawn with your hands resting on your hips and you know the rest of it is owned by common folk just like yourself, the secret service were explaining to my father. If you can't trust your own kind who can you trust? My father munched his mashed potatoes thoughtfully. Why did I take so much mashed potatoes? he asked himself. There are only a few sites left, at reasonable prices, of course, affordable by everyone. Mumbling through his mashed potatoes my father took pad and pencil. WILL IT HALT THE SPREAD OF SYPHILIS? he wrote. "You have what?!" said the president.

§

She laughed, approaching gently my brother and producing her badge. The monk was copying furiously the blueprint for the healing. This could, if it fell into the wrong hands, be sent to hostile governments and cause great damage to our morale—the flames licking at his sandals sweeping low across the floor it must be finished in time.

"The people," remarked sadly the secretary of state, "have bought almost all the land. Yet crime, syphilis, and apathy still run rampant in our society like a spreading fire." He caressed sadly his tuba while the president nodded, his nose pressed thoughtfully to the cold window pane. Too much mashed potatoes at one time, thought my father, is a funny feeling. He pulled the bankroll out of his hip pocket—the same hip where he had had the penicillin shots years before. He peeled off one, two, three hundred dollars. My brother looked impartially at the green—the green of the painting, the green of the money, the green of the land. He began to understand. Did you know, he remarked casually as she kissed him on the mouth, that I have syphilis? The flames, she said.

§

We stood together watching the castle burn, my father and I. "There is nothing to be done!" the secretary of state yammered. "The last lot was sold last night," recalled the president, "and now I get a report that the castle is burning." He tore his hair. The secretary of state rushed wild-eyed to the closet and flung open the door. He moaned and collapsed on the floor at the sight of his tuba in flames . . . flames climbing up his robe . . . holding the parchment above his head . . . keep it from the fire . . . shrivelling in his fingers . . . out the window . . . flame on his throat . . . scream . . .

. . . and out away beyond the parapets my brother naked and Douesta in white garment across the land into the rushing of a brook . . .)